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Short Description:

Cover feature profiling members of the LifeFormations team who blend technology, engineering, and artistic craftsmanship to create extraordinary lifelike characters.

Expanded Description / Subject:

A Robotic Restlessness is a feature article from *The Columbus Dispatch* that offers a behind-the-scenes look at the people who shaped LifeFormations during its early years. The story highlights the artists, engineers, and technicians responsible for creating lifelike animatronic characters and explores the unique work culture that developed inside the studio.

The article emphasizes that every project in animatronics is, by nature, a prototype—demanding innovation, discipline, and adaptability. No two assignments are ever the same, and the excitement of the work is matched only by the pressure of deadlines and the complexity of custom-built characters. The profile captures the creativity, energy, and controlled chaos that fueled the LifeFormations team as they blended technology and artistry to bring characters to life.

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Accent

By Jim Massie

Dispatch Accent Reporter

BOWLING GREEN, Ohio — As a little boy, Tom Kuebler began to wonder what more he could make of his store-bought toys if armed with a little bit of clay and an awful lot of imagination.

"All my life, I was the kind of kid who tore his toys apart," Kuebler said. "They had to be just right, and those Hasbro guys didn't know what they were doing.

"I grew up around sculpture. My mother always taught ceramics — she still does — so there was always clay in the basement. I just had to sculpt my toys. I had Silly Putty on the faces of my G.I. Joes. I was 9 or 10."

At 33, Kuebler has traded Silly Putty for silicone while creating a private universe of life-size figures. His imagination has remained boundless.

FOR
SCULPTORS,
LIFE-SIZE
CHARACTERS
REMAIN
CHILD'S PLAY

Today, he is vice president and senior sculptor for LifeFormations, a northwest Ohio company that creates static and animated three-dimensional characters for museums, theme parks, trade shows, visitor centers and businesses.

The company's animated characters, controlled by robotic systems beneath their silicone skin, sell ideas and products around the world. Even the characters that don't move or speak look as if they could reach out and touch someone at any moment.

Their creator knows he has progressed a long way from the child in Homestead Falls, Ohio, who was not satisfied with his Christmas gifts.

"My mother had a lot of patience in that area when she saw me start to tear things apart," Kuebler said. "I remember I had a ventriloquist's dummy that I just ripped apart. My mother



The old Confederate soldier

thought, 'Oh, my, that cost \$30.' But she waited to see what I was doing. Before she knew it, the dummy's eyes were moving and its eyebrows were moving. So I had an early interest in animatronics. But I never dreamed I'd be doing something like this."

A trip through the LifeFormations offices and workshop recalls the bar scene in *Star*

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A robotic restlessness

A robotic restlessness



LEFT: LifeFormations senior sculptor Tom Kuebler with one of his many creations



Lynn Ischay / Dispatch photos

*"We just did William
McKinley. He was easy;
fat guys are a lot easier."*

Doug Mollsen
chief fabricator



Lynn Ischay / Dispatch photos

ABOVE: Doug Mollsen,
chief fabricator at
LifeFormations, works
on the mechanical
skeleton of a Vulcan
character.

LEFT: Assistant
sculptor Lara Melton
trims excess "flesh"
from a hand.

Wars: A startling array of characters — ranging from alien creatures to elderly comedians — provides one visual shock after another.

At one end of the workshop, Thomas Edison sat in a chair a few feet from George Burns. Edison, with his suit on, was having his movements synchronized with the speech he was to give in his next appearance; the cigar-holding Burns, meanwhile, was quiet, his suit off and his robotics showing.

Doug Mollsen, the company's chief fabricator, spent days designing the mechanisms within the sculpture of the smallish Burns.

"I'd just stare at it for a half an hour, take a break and then come back and try to figure more of it out," he said. "We just did William McKinley. He was easy; fat guys are a lot easier."

Mollsen eventually developed a spry Burns, creating a problem.

"Dougie gave him all these wonderful, graceful moves, but we forgot Burns is 96 years old," Kuebler said. "We watched a video of him performing, and he hardly moves at all."

Live and learn, said Mollsen, who took apart his toys to see how they worked. He used techniques he discovered while building the Burns robot to bring alive one of baseball's Whitey Herzog, which needed a lot more movement.

Each character provides a new challenge, said Kuebler, a Kent State University graduate and former toy designer who met Gene Poor, LifeFormations president, in 1988.

"This isn't a 9-to-5 job," Kuebler said. "It's the kind where sometimes

things go smooth as glass and other times they don't."

He wouldn't have it any other way.

"I thought I'd have to settle for designing toys," he said. "I thought that was a pretty good place to be except for the politics and the fact that you couldn't be your own artist — you were just creating the object of a committee of imaginations; everybody had to put their 2 cents' worth in, so, by the time the thing was done, there was no genius left in it."

"Gene has a great saying: 'God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee.'"

The philosophy leaves room for genius.

"This place is very much like a family," Kuebler said. "It's one committee that does work. By no means do I do everything. We all have our minds open to each other. We've become a pretty crack commando team of static-figure builders. Even when we hurry, we still manage to put the life and creativity into things."

Kuebler's most recent creation is an elderly, unnamed Confederate soldier seated in an equally ancient wheelchair. The war cost the man his legs; the ensuing years robbed him of his teeth and most of his hair. Given half a chance, however, he looks ready to lend anyone careless enough to cross him a piece of his mind.

Kuebler saw a similar face on a greeting card. Most often, he selects strangers as models.

"I see a face of somebody at a mall or a county fair, and I sculpt

them," he said. "It's similar to the way Norman Rockwell worked. I love human expression; it's my art."

"And with everything we do, we give them a certain quirk to their personality that gives them something special."

He liked the sculpture he did of the vampire Nosferatu, recently purchased by author Anne Rice, and one of Frankenstein's monster, which resides in France. He likes characters such as the grizzled Rebel a little more.

"The things I love to do the most are the storytellers," Kuebler said. "This guy is my own personal work. It's something we want to offer museums. Traditionally, what museums have used to tell a story is either script on a wall panel or video monitors."

"What we want to do is actually have someone who was there, wherever 'there' was, tell the story. In this case, he could give you the Southern aspect of the Civil War; he could give you the story from his

point of view."

Kuebler, who supplies the voices for many of the characters, suddenly let loose his imagination and took on the Southern drawl of an elderly man.

"The war wasn't about race," he said defiantly. "It was about economics. This is the way I saw it."

When he was a young boy, Kuebler preferred Halloween over Christmas.

"Everybody came to Kuebler's house at Halloween to see what he had going," he said, smiling. "My brother and I never went out for candy; we were too busy fixing up our house. We pulled strings to move everything."

He grew up but, happily, not all the way.

"I'll probably build Frankenstein again because he was my hero when I was a kid. There was a man who created another man."

"Lord knows, that's what I wound up doing."